PRACTITIONER ESSAY • FOUR-STEP CHANGE FRAMEWORK

Making Change Easier: A Practical Four-Step Framework for Organizational Change

By Chris Turner, PhD

Adapted from *Making Change Easier*, a forthcoming book exploring a practical, four-step approach to organizational change.



Organizations are always going through significant change. We've been talking about that for the last decade or two. New systems, organizational structures, leadership changes, business strategies, (AI, anyone?) and shifting responsibilities are often happening at the same time. At some point we went from "Change is constant" to "How did nobody notice all these programs were hitting my team at the same time?"

For employees and leaders, these changes rarely happen in isolation. A team implementing a new ERP may also be dealing with a reorganization, a new leader, or changes in responsibilities. Individual employees may be facing significant changes in their personal lives as well.

Each of those changes places additional demands on people, many of whom are already dealing with increased workloads and competing demands on their attention. When we don't recognize the cumulative impact, we risk overwhelming the very employees and managers we're depending on to deliver the transformation. I believe that's part of why "Resilience" has become such a buzzword lately.

For change practitioners and business leaders, understanding the impact of one initiative is only part of the challenge. We also need to understand what else teams are facing and adjust our approach accordingly. Think of it as a given team's "universe of concern."

> "Change impact is more of a splash than linear progression."

In an article I wrote for Training Industry Magazine, I described an approach I've adapted that managers can use with their own teams: Honor the Past, Celebrate the Present, and Embrace the Future, with time for reflection and adjustment between each. It's a practical way to help managers engage their teams with

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empathy and recognize what people are experiencing. That's one important tool within a broader change management approach. We also need a straightforward way to understand the business context, recognize the impacts across the organization, and make sure the change delivers the intended results.

After years of working with my clients, leading business units, and teaching organizational psychology, I've brought together the principles and practices I've found most useful into a straightforward four-step framework. The goal is to make change management practical, focused on business outcomes, and responsive to the people experiencing the change.

The four steps are *Name the Change*, *Map the Impacts*, *Engage the Stakeholders*, and *Embed the Change*.

1. Name the Change

Every change program needs a clear foundation.

Before developing communications, training plans, or stakeholder engagement activities, we need to understand the business context. What's changing? Why are we changing it? Why now? What happens if we don't change? What does success look like, and what's the expected timeline?

The answers form the basis of the case for change, which becomes the foundation for the story we tell to stakeholders. This is about being able to explain how the business arrived at its decision to individual contributors and business leaders in a way that helps them connect what they're doing to the broader business strategy. For a change team to drive awareness and alignment, this is the critical foundation for how they interact with the business. Understanding the business context is critical to helping people understand where the organization is going and why.

2. Map the Impacts

Once we understand the change and how to talk about it, we need to understand how it will affect different parts of the organization. We take that story out and start discussing it with business leaders.

> "What other initiatives are impacting you and your team?"

Not every group will experience the same change in the same way.

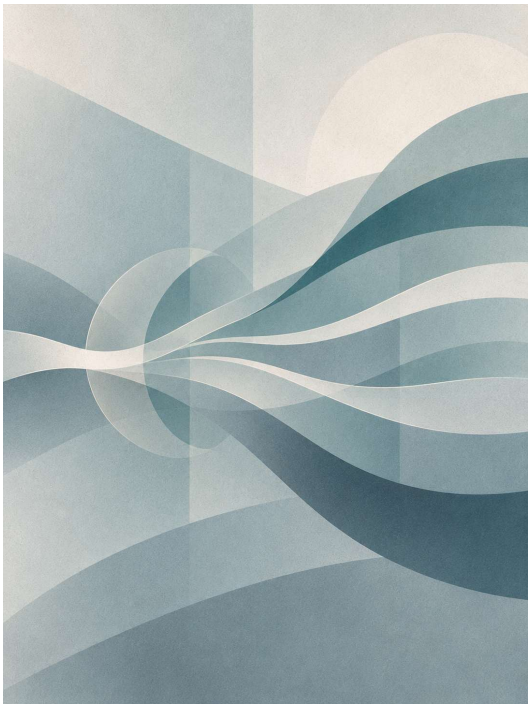
Imagine that Finance may be significantly impacted while HR experiences only minor changes. Even within Finance, different teams may face very different challenges. I like to think of this as a stakeholder heat map, identifying which groups will be most impacted, which will be most challenged, where leaders have an entirely different set of priorities, and where we need to focus our attention.

But there's another important consideration: What else is happening to these teams? Are they going through a restructure? Implementing another system? Working with a new manager? Moving offices? Under direct pressure to reduce cost or increase revenue?

Understanding these overlapping changes helps us give business leaders a broader picture of what their teams are facing. That information should influence how we approach the change. Some teams may need more time to prepare. Others may need additional support, different communication approaches, or adjustments to the implementation schedule.

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3. Engage the Stakeholders



With the change story and impacts understood, we can develop a stakeholder engagement approach that reflects the needs of different groups. The story must be consistent across the organization, but how we communicate that story will vary. What matters to Finance may be very different from what matters to IT, Compliance, Sales, or Marketing. Think of it as having five primary bullets describing the program, and each group needs to see those bullets in a different order.

Leaders have an important role. Employees often look to their immediate managers and higher-up group leaders to understand what a change means for their work and their teams, and, frankly, whether or not they should care. That means helping leaders understand the change, recognize their teams' concerns, and have meaningful conversations. A mass email from the COO might get read, but that doesn't mean the message has been absorbed. That part has to happen at the team or group level.

This is also where practical techniques, like the *Honor the Past*, *Celebrate the Present*, *Embrace the Future* approach can help managers engage employees in meaningful conversations.

Some groups will need significant support. Others may need little more than awareness and a basic understanding of what's changing. The stakeholder engagement approach should reflect those differences, with deliberate planning and strategic thought about where to invest time and energy.

4. Embed the Change

Getting to go-live is an important milestone, but often it's where organizations break out a cake, move on to the next thing, and after launch, behaviors can quickly slide backwards. The real objective is improving organizational performance. Installing a new system, introducing a process, or changing an organizational structure doesn't automatically mean people have adopted the new way of working.

Reinforcement is important. We need to continue supporting employees and monitoring adoption until the new way of working becomes routine and habit. To get there, we need to understand whether employees have the skills, tools, and willingness to operate in the new environment. We also need to recognize that people may initially comply with a change without fully accepting it.

Without beliefs eventually catching up to behavior, especially when pressure is off and nobody's watching, people are likely to slide backwards toward the path of least resistance.

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Ongoing leader messaging, recognition, incentives, performance measures, and continued support all play a role in helping the organization sustain the intended change. The goal is to move beyond implementation and ensure the change delivers the business outcomes it was designed to achieve.

Keeping Change Management Practical

Change management doesn't have to be complicated, and when it gets overly complicated or expensive, it becomes its own worst enemy.

You don't need an advanced degree in organizational psychology to manage change effectively. What you do need is dedicated, focused attention and a commitment to driving business objectives through the execution of a program you may not have had a hand in designing. One place organizations get into trouble is when someone is expected to manage change while also managing 50 hours a week of their regular operational responsibilities. Or if you're approaching change the same way you approach project management. It's not only about being on time and on budget. The change focus is on that ready, willing, and able trifecta.

> “’Build it and they will come’ only works in baseball movies.”

My goal with this framework is executing a lean, cost-effective approach that produces the best possible outcome with the lowest reasonable investment of time, energy, and effort. The four steps provide a straightforward way for change practitioners and business leaders to understand what's happening, recognize the impacts on their people, provide appropriate support, and help make the change part of how the organization operates.

That's what Making Change Easier is about.

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